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## ON THE DATE OF THE CRUCIFIXION.

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### III.

Did the crucifixion take place on the fourteenth day of the month Nisan or on the fifteenth?

Nisan (or Abib, as it was called in olden time) was the first month of the Jewish year and corresponded roughly to our March-April. We cannot fix it more precisely, for in the first place the months were lunar, and were therefore continually varying with respect to the year; in the next place they were settled by observation merely. If some ripe ears of barley could be found as the new moon was expected, the new year was declared to have begun; if not, a month was intercalated. In critical cases therefore a late or early spring might just make the difference. Similarly, if the moon's thin crescent was visible on the expected night, the ensuing day was proclaimed holy as the first day of the month; if not, even though the moon's absence was caused by clouds or rain, a day was intercalated, but of course only one.

By these simple expedients the calendar was kept fairly accurate without any of those elaborate calculations by which Julius Cæsar put the matter on its present basis. Modern precision however was never thought of. The year did not begin on the right day, but on the nearest new moon to the right day, or one month later; the month did not begin at the true new moon, but when the moon was first visible, which would be a day and half or two days later. The day itself did not begin at sunset, but when from one to three stars were visible. Every thing was vague and empirical.

It is impossible, therefore, for us now to recover an ancient Jewish date with any certainty. We cannot be sure to a day,

sometimes not to a month. It is however probable that already in the time of Christ contact with Greek civilization had introduced some more systematic methods of calculation.

The Jews were not seriously inconvenienced by the uncertainty of the calendar. Those who lived in the Holy Land received a fortnight's notice of the passover's approach, ten days' notice of the time for selecting the paschal lamb. Whether therefore they intended to keep the feast in Jerusalem or to eat it in their own village, there was ample time for preparation. The Jews of the dispersion came to pentecost rather than to passover.

On the fourteenth day of Nisan the paschal lamb was slain "between the evenings," (3-5 P. M.) according to Josephus, and was eaten the same night. In legal language (as the day legally began at sunset) it was eaten on the fifteenth, but in popular language it was eaten on the night of the fourteenth. To prevent misconception I shall adhere to popular language throughout the rest of this paper, and reckon the days, as we do, from midnight to midnight.

Next day, the fifteenth, was the first day of unleavened bread, one of the greatest festivals in the year, for it commemorated the deliverance from Egypt. Josephus, however, tells us that in the time of Christ the fourteenth was commonly called the first day of unleavened bread, and we find it so styled in the gospels. We must not suppose that the great festival had been shifted: that was certainly not the case: but the Rabbis in their endeavor "to set a hedge about the law" had required all leaven to be destroyed one day sooner than the law directed, and so there were practically eight days of unleavened bread now. The numbering therefore was altered, the festivals being on the second and the eighth instead of the first and the seventh.

The question is, Did Christ assemble his disciples to eat the passover on the evening of the fourteenth or was he at that time already resting in the grave, the last conflict being over? Strange to say this question has been long debated. Various makeshift answers have been given. But with the increasing sense of honesty which marks our age, some of the best scholars have dared to say "I do not know."

Let us first read S. Mark's testimony. "Now after two days was the passover and the feast of unleavened bread . . . . . And on the first day of unleavened bread when (the Jews) used to sacrifice the passover, the disciples say unto him, where wilt thou that we go and prepare that thou mayest eat the passover?" . . . . . Say ye to the Master of the house the Teacher saith, Where is my lodging where I must eat the passover with my disciples? . . . . And they prepared the passover."

SS. Matthew and Luke fully confirm this. The latter adds that Jesus said, "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer."

If we had the synoptists alone, no one would doubt that Jesus ate the passover the night before the crucifixion and that he was therefore crucified on the fifteenth.

But now let us look at S. John.

"*Before*" (not "at") "the feast of the passover Jesus" partook of the last supper (13: 1). During the meal Judas went out and, the cause of his departure being secret, some supposed, since Judas held the bag, that Jesus said unto him, "Buy what we need for the feast" (13: 29). They were not therefore already concluding the feast, but were looking forward to it. "Judas went out, and it was night." Yet the shops were not shut, as they would have been on the night of the fourteenth, for legally next day's festival would have begun on which no work was allowed. Next morning S. John tells us that the chief priests "themselves entered not into the prætorium, that they might not be defiled but might eat the passover" (18: 28). They had not, therefore, eaten the passover the night before, but looked forward to doing so that night. "And it was the preparation of the passover" when they crucified Him (19: 14). "The Jews therefore, since it was Preparation, that the bodies might not remain on the cross upon the sabbath" . . . applied to Pilate that they might be taken down (19: 31). We have seen that Preparation almost certainly means Friday, in which case these verses do not affect the question. They count neither way. Still we have a singularly long list of dates, some of which seem to demand the fourteenth, all permit of it. If we read S.

John's gospel alone, no one would doubt that our Lord was crucified on the fourteenth, and therefore did not partake of the Passover.

Let us first glance at some of the solutions which have been offered of this difficult problem at various times.

1. Eusebius suggested and S. Chrysostom developed the idea, which has been very generally held, that the chief priests had been so busily employed in compassing Christ's arrest and conducting his trial, that they had found no time to eat the passover on the proper night, but had put off the duty of doing so till the fifteenth.

But Christ's arrest appears to have taken place after midnight. The passover was eaten when the sun had set. The chief priests were rigid legalists and would have abundance of time for celebrating the most solemn of their ordinances. Moreover, this supposition leaves two out of S. John's three statements unexplained.

2. The majority, therefore, of modern interpreters have inclined rather to the view that Christ himself anticipated the passover, eating it one day sooner than usual because he knew that his hour was come and because he "earnestly desired to eat it with them before he suffered."

But S. Mark distinctly writes that it was the disciples who suggested to him that the time for eating the passover had come, and that they did so "on the first day of unleavened bread when (the Jews) sacrificed the passover." Nothing can be clearer than this. The usual day, the usual hour, was come. They fancied that he had overlooked it, and they call attention to the necessity of making preparations for the universal religious duty.

Moreover, although the law directed every master of a house to kill the paschal lamb himself, no restriction about place being given, the later centralization required that the lamb must be slain in the temple. The Jews of the dispersion could not eat the passover except when they went up—perhaps once in their lives—to the Holy City. Now the priesthood have refused to sacrifice the lamb a day before the usual time. And the advocates of

this view are obliged to maintain that no lamb was obtained. They point out that in the narrative of the last supper neither lamb nor bitter herbs are mentioned. There seems to have been nothing on the table but bread, wine, and one bowl containing fish or salad or other condiment. It was (as S. John describes it) an ordinary supper. This difficulty we shall consider presently. Meanwhile S. Mark's words "Prepare that thou mayest eat the passover" and "They made ready the passover" must surely mean the paschal lamb.

3. Rabbinic students have suggested an entirely new explanation which in recent times has gained a wide acceptance. They contend that by "eating the passover" S. John meant something quite different from what S. Mark meant by the same expression. S. Mark plainly intended the paschal lamb, but S. John refers to a festal meal which is not mentioned in the Pentateuch but was prescribed by the tradition of the elders. Commonly called the *Chăṭgāh*, it could be eaten on any of the seven days of the feast, but was usually taken on the second—the old "first"—day. It was considered of equal or even greater importance than the paschal lamb, and the term, "eating the passover" included it or sometimes alluded to it alone. In S. John, they argue, the expression "eat the passover" must refer to the *Chăṭgāh*, for if the chief priests had defiled themselves by entering the Prætorium, such lesser defilement, caused by the presence of Roman eagles and other idolatrous signs, possibly also of leavened bread, would always be removed by washing the body at sunset. There was nothing after such purification to prevent them from eating the passover.

The feeling against idolatry and idolaters was particularly strong in that age, when the Jews were daily brought into contact with it. I can hardly believe that such pollution was so lightly got rid of. Moreover, the scribes would wish to attend the sacrifice as well as the supper. If the *Chăṭgāh* could be eaten on any of the seven days, why should not the chief priests have postponed it till the third or fourth day, since their presence in Pilate's court was so imperatively demanded. But, indeed, I am rather suspicious about these later Jewish ceremonies. The destruction of

Jerusalem, which altered the whole procedure of sacrifice, created a revolution in the observance of the Law. The Talmud, from which our knowledge of the *Chăḡḡgāh* is derived, was not written until five centuries after the city was destroyed, and is no sure guide to Jewish customs in the time of Christ. No ancient authors imagined that "eating the passover" in S. John meant something quite different from "eating the passover" in S. Mark.

And there is another difficulty. S. John tells us that all our Lord's adherents were excommunicated (9 : 22 ; 12 : 42). And if so, it would be impossible for them to get a lamb sacrificed except by intrigue to which they would not stoop.

Professor Hort, a few months before his death, had a correspondence with Professor Sanday on this subject. Only a few extracts from Dr. Hort's letters have been published, but Dr. Sanday, who has advocated the *Chăḡḡgāh*, acknowledged himself convinced. He admitted that there is a real discrepancy between the synoptists and S. John, and that none of the explanations which had been offered could be considered satisfactory.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile my own examination of the synoptic problem had forced upon me another solution on entirely new lines.

When you look at the synoptic gospels from an historical point of view the first thing that strikes you is the extraordinary fact that they do not bring Christ to Jerusalem until he entered it to be crucified. Now the more you consider this, the more remarkable it becomes.

It cannot represent the whole truth. Even if we rejected the fourth gospel altogether, we should feel certain, both from antecedent probability and from certain casual expressions in the synoptists (as "O Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered thy children together . . . ") that Christ was no stranger in the Holy City. A Judean ministry is quite as necessary as a Galilean.

Whence then came the omission? Did S. Peter entirely pass over the work done in Judæa? I do not think so. The very fact that S. Mark devotes six chapters out of sixteen to

<sup>1</sup> *The Expositor*. Vol. V., p. 183.

events which took place in the precincts of Jerusalem, makes me suspicious. Important though the passover was, it seems to be narrated at undue length. The proportions of the history are destroyed.

And when we look closer, there are many things in those six chapters which have no particular affinity to the passover, but would decidedly gain in significance, if they were put a year or two before it. They show how public feeling was educated ; but that very education could scarcely be completed in a fortnight. Events in real life move much more slowly.

And there is one incident—the cleansing of the temple—which S. John has placed at the beginning, and not at the close, of our Saviour's ministry. It is very much to be noticed that S. John describes the cleansing of the temple as happening at a passover ; but not at the final passover which is the only one known to S. Mark, but at an earlier passover which Christ passed in Jerusalem, some say three years, some two, those who consider John 6 : 4 to be spurious, one year before the crucifixion.

It has been usual to suppose that there were two cleansings of the temple, one at the earlier passover, one at the last. Such a repetition is, to say the least, highly improbable. That Christ should cleanse the temple once, is intelligible ; that he should do so when he first came forward as the Messiah, to test the obedience of the Jews and appeal to their religious feelings, I can understand. But to what end would a repetition serve ? And if repeated, why should not S. Mark or S. John have told us so ?

I know that many persons object to admit so serious a chronological discrepancy in S. Mark, who was S. Peter's interpreter. But let us look at the facts calmly. S. Mark only brings Christ to Jerusalem at the last.

Anything which happened at Jerusalem during an earlier visit must therefore either be omitted by S. Mark, transferred into Galilee, or inserted into holy week. The structure of his gospel permits no other alternative. In short the gospel is not arranged on a chronological but on a topical plan.

If you ask how this is, my answer is that S. Peter did not give a complete course of lessons, nor did he arrange them in



order. S. Mark, as Papias tells us, did not write in order, because S. Peter's lessons had been adapted to the immediate wants of the pupils, one lesson being given at a time as the occasion demanded. S. Peter left them so, and S. Mark could not supply the defect. He was not an eye-witness, and could not recover the true sequence.

Professor Sanday fully agrees with me on this point. "The simple fact is," he writes, "that the synoptic gospels are only a series of incidents loosely strung together, with no chronology at all worthy of the name."<sup>1</sup>

I earnestly exhort all biblical students to examine into this question of the chronology of the synoptists for themselves. If I am right, the exhausting labors and tortuous explanations of the harmonists, in their endeavor to reconcile what cannot be reconciled, have been wasted.

I wish heartily that any words of mine could save future students of the gospel from what I am convinced is a useless task. There is so much to be done in more profitable researches, that I grudge the time and energy spent on harmonies. When these evangelists narrate the same events in the same order, we are not entitled to infer that they follow the true chronology, but only that they follow S. Mark, whose order is not chronological.

Now if it be conceded that the cleansing of the temple belonged to the earlier passover, it is clear that the section in which Christ was asked, "By what authority doest thou these things?" (Mark 11:27-33) must be transferred to the earlier passover also. And if so, I should transfer several sections which are found in the next chapter, not, perhaps, to the first passover, but rather to one or other of those subsequent visits which our Lord paid to Jerusalem. These are Mark 12:13-17, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Cæsar?" 18-27, the seven brethren marrying; 28-36, the great commandment of the law; 38-40, the warning against the scribes. All these sections have no real connection with holy week, but will gain in significance if we put them into an earlier period.

<sup>1</sup>*Expositor*, Vol. v., page 16.

And I should then carry these suggestions one step further. S. Peter seems to me to have narrated how Christ, who was obedient to the law for our sakes, ate the passover in the Holy City with his disciples on his earlier visit, when he was not yet excommunicate. Then they "made ready the Passover," ate the paschal lamb and the bitter herb, drank the wine, sang the hymn with all the customary ceremonies.

One, two, or more years later, Christ again assembled his disciples for the last supper. On this occasion he gave them the sign of the man bearing the pitcher of water. On this occasion he instituted the eucharist at the close of the meal, and spoke those discourses which S. John has recorded. It was the thirteenth of the month Nisan, and, therefore, not the passover.

S. Mark has fused the two significant suppers into one, by transferring to the latter what really belong to the former. The other evangelists have followed him in this, as in all the rest of his chronological confusions.

Some one may object that S. Luke records this sentence, "I have earnestly desired to eat this *passover* with you before I suffer," thus connecting the two meals together, which I separate by a year or more. This sentence, I reply, is peculiar to S. Luke and if any one will read what I have written about S. Luke's "Editorial notes"<sup>1</sup> and will then examine S. Luke's Gospel to ascertain whether I have not good grounds for what I say, he will not think that verse a serious objection. The thought pressing hard on our Lord's human mind was, "This is my last meal." The western catechists have slightly modified the expression of it, or S. Luke himself has inserted the word "passover," as is his wont.

It is possible, however, that there was no such blending of narratives as I have supposed, but that the whole scene should be transferred to the earlier passover and rehearsed at the last supper. Averse though I am to vain repetitions, there is one repetition which I admit would have been full of significance. What if Christ made the personal covenant by the breaking of bread between himself and his disciples at the first passover in

<sup>1</sup>*Composition of the Four Gospels*, pp. 116-127. (Macmillans, New York).

Jerusalem, renewed it at his second passover in Capernaum (John 6: 4) with a larger company than the twelve, and in close connection with the feeding of the five thousand, and finally repeated it a third time on the night on which he was betrayed, with perhaps the additional word that his body, which they were to eat, would soon be broken for them; his blood, which they were to drink, would soon be shed? In this way we shall both make the sacrament more intelligible as a covenant of brotherhood between himself and his people; we shall explain and justify the mysterious language of S. John 6: 51, which has always been a difficulty with interpreters; we shall justify S. Peter's statement that our Lord Jesus Christ on the same night in which he was betrayed took bread, and we shall reduce S. Mark's chronological error to a *minimum*.

Our records of Christ's life are fragmentary. If it were not for a single incidental statement in S. John,<sup>1</sup> we should have concluded confidently that the sacrament of holy baptism was first instituted after the resurrection. And if we now know that it had been practiced by the apostles from the commencement of Christ's ministry, what wonder if the other sacrament had been celebrated too? We might have to modify our conception of it, and regard it as a covenant of union rather than a commemorative sacrifice; in short, as a sacrifice, according to the ancient conception of the word rather than the modern, but we should, I think, only understand its real meaning the better for such a change.

The question discussed in this paper is a very serious one. Scholars are beginning to acknowledge freely that there is a contradiction between the synoptists and S. John respecting the day of the month of the crucifixion. The old explanations of the difference are failing or have already failed. The genuineness of the Fourth Gospel is at stake. Under these circumstances I have pointed out that the contradiction does not lie between SS. Peter and John, both of whom must have known the facts, but between SS. Mark and John, of whom S. Mark did not know the facts, and may have confused the records, as S. John shows him to have done on other occasions.

<sup>1</sup> John 4: 1-2.

I have then shown how S. Mark's error may have arisen, and how very slight it is, and how easily it may have been made. Those who at all hazards maintain the inerrancy of Holy Scripture will necessarily reject my proposals; but from others I ask a patient hearing. It is important to remember that ancient opinion followed S. John in accepting the fourteenth as the day of the crucifixion. Not only is this proven by the existence of the Quarto-decimans in the second century, but it was the belief of Apollinaris, Clement of Alexandria, Irenæus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus. Not till the fourth century did the other opinion begin to prevail.